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ABSTRACT

In global history courses and in western civilization courses Europe might be better treated as a subcontinent or, better yet, as a coastal, peninsular, or even insular phenomenon. This would be more consistent with both its geography and its history. H. J. Mackinder argued that until the 15th century Europe was powerfully shaped by repeated waves of invasion of nomads from the east. From 1500 to the mid-19th century, Europe was influenced less by what Mackinder called its continental heartland than by the seas. Beginning in 1500, Europe's geographical and historical frontiers shifted from east to west. W. P. Webb argued that the frontiers of the Americas were responsible for many of the developments previously attributed to internal European causes. Students should be introduced to the vast advantage that water held over land transport until the coming of the railway in the 19th century. The development of plantation economies was largely a coastal and insular enterprise, with African slaves as the chief source of labor. The loss of the control of U.S. coasts and islands by 1820 had a revolutionary effect on European economies. European capitalism had no choice but to move from a commercial to an industrial enterprise. In the 19th century Europeans became true migrants, giving up their ancient diasporic habits for a one-way passage. The age of continents, the most powerful challenge to the 20th century, has come from the globalization of capitalism itself, which has gone "offshore," defying the boundaries of both continents and nation states. (Contains 26 endnotes.) (BT)

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Seeing European History from the Outside In

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World history as written and taught today is largely a landlocked history, narrated either continent by continent or by relations among continents. Recently geographers have begun to question the very concept of continents; and it may be time for historians to do the same.¹ One of the things I want to suggest today is that in global history courses (as well as in western civilization courses) Europe might be better treated as a subcontinental or, better yet, as a coastal, peninsular, or even insular phenomenon, for this would be more consistent with both its geography and its history.

Any world map will make Europe's subcontinental position quite evident, and make it easy to see why the first modern global geographer, Halford J. Mackinder, urged his contemporaries a hundred years ago to "look upon Europe and European history as subordinate to Asian and Asiatic history, for Europe is, in a very real sense, the outcome of the secular struggle against Asiatic invasion."² Mackinder argued that up to the fifteenth century Europe was powerfully shaped by repeated waves of invasion of nomads from the east. It saw itself as but one part, indeed a marginal part, of what was understood at the time as the Orbis Terrarum, "world island," with its back to a terrifying sea,

Oceanus.³

Geographers and historians did not begin to think in terms of continents until well after the fifteenth century, when European voyagers linked coastal navigation systems of eastern and western Eurasia to form one continuous ocean. As Mackinder pointed out this feat had the effect of "multiplying more than thirty fold the sea surface and coastal lands to which she [Europe] had access, and wrapping her influence round the Euro-Asiatic land-power which had hitherto threatened her very existence."⁴

Europe ceased to be subcontinental, but it would be a long time before she became a continent. Now that she turned her face to the sea, it was her coastal, peninsular, and insular features that should claim our attention. From 1500 to the mid-nineteenth century, Europe was influenced less by what Mackinder called its continental heartland than by the seas. For almost four centuries, the oceans were the venues of European economic and political activity, exerting by far the greatest outside influence on Europe itself. Europe had tamed mighty Oceanus, thereby shattering forever the ancient notion of the world island, but, in doing so, creating a water-world which would shape its character far more than the landmass at its back. Until the telegraph and the railroad took over the functions of water, one can talk about a aqueous world history of which Europe as an interdependent part.⁵

Beginning in 1500 Europe's geographical and historical frontiers shifted from east to west. The great Texas historian,

Walter Prescott Webb, recognized the significance of this in his The Great Frontier, published in 1952, which argued for what can be called an "American" interpretation of European history.⁵ Webb argued that the frontiers of the Americas were responsible many of the developments previously attributed to internal European causes. My talk today builds on the Webb thesis, but also departs from it to the degree that I attribute more weight to sea rather than land frontiers, arguing that the first European empires remained primarily coastal, peninsular, and insular rather than continental.

I

In the current era of land and air power, it is difficult to think in aqueous terms, yet, if we are to reintegrate European with world history, it makes a great deal of sense to do so. It is important to introduce students to the vast advantage that water held over land transport until the coming of the railway in the nineteenth century.⁷

Once this is established it is then possible to help students understand the ways early modern and modern European history has been constructed from the outside in. We can begin with the encounters with the peoples of the New World, which gave the peoples of Europe their first sense of themselves as Europeans, as opposed to Christians or as various nationalities. As John Elliott noted: "In discovering America Europe had discovered itself."⁸ Europe shed its identity as Christendom for new, more secular notions of Europeaness, and, in

the process, exchanged one "other" -- the infidel -- for another -- the savage.⁹

It was as much at sea as on land that this occurred. William McNeill describes a shift from steppe to sea frontiers.¹⁰ It happened aboard ships, whose crews and passengers were invariably multilingual and multiethnic, that this new consciousness arose.¹¹ Ports were invariably more cosmopolitan than hinterlands. Europeans who settled hugged the coasts and islands, turning their backs to the continent in the same manner as they were accustomed to doing at home. There existed what might be described as a European diaspora, cosmopolitan, multinational, even multiracial in character, always on the move along the coasts of Africa, the Americas, and Asia, migrating from island to island, never quite settled or identified with continents as such.¹² The first to make an explicit continental identification were the Afrikaners (a term coined in 1707), but it would be almost another century before other settlers followed their lead.¹³

The seas were, of course, the carriers of flora and fauna as well as people. As Alfred Crosby has so thoroughly documented, European animals and plants have had an enormous impact on the world's ecology.¹⁴ No less important, however, was the influence of the New World biota on Europe itself, through the import of new crops like the potato and the tomato. The potato may well have contributed to the rise of European populations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but we should not ignore the impact of the sea's own abundance on the

European diet, making it for a time the most saltwater fish eating civilization in the world. The new water world also altered ideas as well as material conditions. As Richard Grove has shown, the shock of seeing island edens ecologically devastated by imported animals and crops was one of the sources of early modern European environmental thinking.¹⁵

Of course, the impact of sea-transported diseases long predates 1500, but it can be argued that microbes travelled faster and more widely in the early modern period than before, with devastating effects on New World populations.¹⁶ The impact of New World syphilis has been recently disproven, but there is no doubt that encounters with disease abroad had a tremendous impact on European medicine, and should be accounted as another example of European history from the outside in.

II

But, as Walter Prescott Webb insisted, the greatest external influence was economic. European exploration was initially directed to reopening and expanding trade with Asia. Had this been its only consequence, European economies would probably not have changed a great deal. Had the only thing Europeans found of great value upon the accidental discovery of the New World been gold and silver, this too would not have had a long lasting effect on internal European economic systems. It was really the possibility of producing export crops that proved transformative, not just for the Americas and Asia but for Europe itself.

The development of plantation economies was largely a coastal and insular enterprise, as it had been in the Mediterranean in earlier centuries where sugar production had first been perfected. Sugar plantations moved from there to the Atlantic islands of Madeiras and the Canaries, and finally to the Americas, where the Caribbean proved particularly suitable. Even where plantations were continental they were invariably located near water, as were all the fur trading enterprises that Europeans developed.

But the water world became even more important when African slaves became the chief source of labor supply for the plantation economy. Once again, coasts and islands played a central role, both in the slave trade itself and in maintaining slavery. What the sea brought to the New World, it effectively imprisoned there. Islands proved the ideal location for slave and convict labor in both the Atlantic and the Pacific.¹⁷

Crops from the plantations -- sugar, tobacco, coffee -- were not only to enrich European merchants, but transformed the habits and tastes of Europe in lasting way. The manner in which smoking and coffee drinking interacted with the protoindustrial revolution within Europe itself is another fascinating instance of European history from the outside in.¹⁸ And this was directly linked to expansion of rural manufacturing that took place in insular and coastal Europe to supply the plantation economies and the African slave trade in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁹

It is simply impossible to imagine the capitalist commercial revolution without this export trade. Europe's balance of trade with Asia had always been in the negative; Asia competed with rather than imported Europe's manufactures. Exports to Africa and the Americas may have been only a small part of European output, but in the end it was decisive both in terms of the accumulation of capital and in rising demand which led to the bottlenecks in the rural manufacturing system that eventually produced the concentration of production in factories, massive urbanization, and all the changes we associate with the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century.²⁰

III

Until the late eighteenth century, however, the first European empires and the commercial capitalist revolution had produced growth, but not a mass structural social and political transformation. That was about to change, however, with the American colonial revolts in what R.R. Palmer called the Age of Democratic Revolution.²¹ Palmer and others have established the influence of the American on the French Revolution. The counter-revolutionary impact of the same events on Great Britain is also now well established.²² The overall effect was to turn Europe inward, away (if only temporarily) from empire building to nation building, toward continental rather than aqueous concerns.

The loss of control of American coasts and islands by 1820 had an equally revolutionary effect on European economies.

The shift of investment from plantations abroad to factories at home, from slave to free wage labor ~~had~~ had already been under way for some time, but now European capitalism had no choice but to move from commercial to industrial enterprise. This shift, however painful, was to lay foundations for yet another surge of imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century. This time, however, the thrust was to be continental rather than coastal and insular.²³

When European imperialism revived in the late nineteenth century it was as much land- as seaborne. Thanks to a combination of new technologies and medicines, Europeans were able to move into the interiors of Africa and Asia. The impact of the New Imperialism on Europe itself was perhaps more cultural and social than it was economic, but once again it is important to narrate its history from the outside in.

It was not until the nineteenth century that Europeans became true migrants, giving up their ancient diasporic habits, for a one way passage. Even then, many migrants to the Americas returned to their homelands; yet the outmigration of some forty five million Europeans had enormous effects on Europe itself. The Neoeuropes -- South Africa, Canada, United States, Australia, Brazil, Argentina, and New Zealand -- where large numbers ended up were massively altered, but the effects on Europe were no less significant. It helped relieve population pressure at a crucial time, thus averting the Malthusian trap that had threatened Europe earlier. Furthermore, the

transformation of European peasants into Canadian farmers or New Zealand ranchers solved the problem of provisioning the new industrial cities. European food provisioning was revolutionized as much by external as internal factors.

IV

The twentieth century must be considered an age of continents. This was Mackinder's prophecy in 1904 and it was on this premise that power politics operated until quite recently, despite evidence that air and missile technologies made even the heartlands vulnerable. The Germans paid closest attention to the heartland hypothesis, and Hitler's New Order can be seen as an effort at implementation.²⁴ But American and Soviet thinkers also had their versions of continentalism; and the rise of these superpowers shaped Europe's own continental ambitions.

Continental ambitions have been called into serious doubt only very recently with the advent of new forms air power and now by electronic communications. But the most powerful challenge has come from the globalization of capitalism itself, which has gone "offshore," defying the boundaries of both continents and nation states. As Zygmunt Bauman was recently noted: "In the world we inhabit, distance does not matter much... There are no 'natural borders' any more, neither are there obvious places to occupy."²⁵

Ironically, the end of the Cold War and globalization have laid the groundwork for a renewal of European continentalism, bringing together for the first time its eastern with its western,

its southern with its northern reaches. While we cannot yet predict what political form this latest incarnation of the "New Europe" will take, the continental discourse is stronger now than it has been in a very long time. While there are those on its coasts and islands who resist those tendencies, the trend seems reasonably clear.

Once again, however, we see Europe being influenced by that going on beyond its territorial boundaries. We must ask whether this new European consciousness is a renewal of an older internally generated identity or a response, as so often in the past, to events in the larger world. If the first unique sense of Europeaness was initially the product of Asiatic invasion and later first contact with the New World, there is good reason to believe that this sense of a "New Europe" is also being produced by relations with the rest of the world; and yet another reason why we need to narrate European history from the outside in, as well as from the inside out.²⁶

Austin, February, 2000

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26. Gillis, "A View from the Outside and a Vision of Global Social History," Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis, 23, nr. 2 (1997), pp. 224-238.